



Assessing Public Policies and Social Advancement: Comparative Examination of Evaluation Models

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Abstract

The article introduces two models for evaluating public policies: the idealistic and the pragmatic. In the idealistic model, social progress is defined by changes that align societal organization and public authority conduct with idealized standards. Conversely, the pragmatic model defines social progress by comparing the current societal state, post-changes, with the previous state, pre-changes, based on specific judgment criteria. The article contends that the adoption of different models poses a primary challenge to clarity in public discourse regarding policy implementation, as it obscures points of disagreement. Advocating for the pragmatic model, the article suggests it aligns better with the use of scientific criteria for assessing policy effectiveness.

Keywords: Social progress; Public policy; Evaluation; Ideal theory; Idealistic; Pragmatic.

Introduction

When the purposes of public policies are well-defined, decision-making regarding these policies can be viewed as instrumental problem-solving. However, in the realm of public policy discourse, objectives often spark contention, as illustrated by the divergence between the two evaluation models outlined previously. In such instances, consensus on the underlying issue to be addressed is lacking, rendering resolution of conflicting objectives beyond the scope of empirical techniques or applied research.

For instance, proponents of evidence-based policymaking (EBP), akin to the pragmatic evaluation model presented earlier, stress the meticulous and accurate utilization of scientific evidence in policy assessment. Nevertheless, supporters of EBP have faced criticism for ostensibly stripping the public policy discourse of its political dimension, reducing evaluations solely to technical considerations. EBP operates under the assumption that policy objectives are predefined, making it potentially futile for its proponents to persuade adherents of the idealistic evaluation model to endorse a specific policy by presenting evidence of its beneficial outcomes, unless the idealistic evaluator shares the same vision of an ideal societal state.

This article advocates for the pragmatic evaluation model, which is deemed more amenable to employing scientific methodologies or criteria for evaluating policy effectiveness. While idealistic theorizing may contribute significantly to diagnosing social issues and formulating policy proposals, its utility in evaluating policies — irrespective of their contribution to social progress — is limited.

While the adoption of a pragmatic approach to policy analysis is not a novel concept, the existing literature on policy analysis has predominantly focused on the processes of policy formulation and implementation, often neglecting the significance of validation criteria. Similarly, discussions on policy evaluation have frequently centered around impact assessment, primarily concerning the identification of causal effects of policies. Consequently, this focus tends to obscure the fact that the evaluation of public policies also entails a clash of divergent social values.

In a democratic society, the quality of public policy discourse plays a pivotal role in determining the efficacy of democracy itself. Therefore, achieving clarity regarding the underlying rationales behind differing positions in the public policy debate is paramount. The premise of this article is that the evaluation models under discussion contribute to fostering greater clarity regarding the stances adopted in the public policy discourse.

Social Progress, Social State and Public Policies

The fundamental concept in assessing a public policy lies in the notion of social progress, which varies depending on the evaluation model under consideration. Let's begin by examining the concept of social progress within the pragmatic evaluation model.

Definition 1: Social progress is defined as the occurrence of change in the societal state, where the prevailing societal state is deemed superior to the preceding one, based on predetermined judgment criteria.

In this model, social progress is gauged by directly comparing the societal conditions existing before and after the change. The societal state is comprehended as the outcome of societal organization (the social contract), encompassing both the desirable outcomes of societal organization (such as income and wealth; freedoms and opportunities; respect and prestige) and the corresponding duties and responsibilities borne by individuals as members of society.

Definition 2: The social state comprises a collection of social positions and the regulations governing the allocation of these positions among members of society.

Each social position dictates the individual's interaction with other members of society, with each position being associated with a distinct set of benefits, rights, burdens, and obligations. Social positions may pertain to occupation, community status, or familial roles. Typically, individuals occupy multiple positions, and the associated benefits, rights, burdens, and obligations may manifest in formal or informal capacities.

While the enhancement of the social state represents the ultimate objective of public policies, proponents of the idealistic model diverge from viewing a comparison between successive social states as the optimal method for evaluating social progress. Instead, they advocate for the identification and pursuit of ideal societal characteristics. Consequently, any deviation from these ideal traits, even if resulting in an ostensibly superior social state, is deemed undesirable by this model. Such a change would signify an improvement that steers society away from achieving an even greater advancement in the future. In this model, the definition of social progress is articulated as follows.

Definition 3: Social progress occurs when shifts in societal organization bring us closer to the idealized social institutions and governance practices.

The ideal characteristics of societal organization are perceived as attainable, albeit potentially over the long term, and once achieved, they would yield a preferable social state. While these ideals are considered achievable, there may not be complete knowledge regarding the optimal methods for their attainment. Therefore, the discourse surrounding public policies encompasses both the ideal to be pursued and the appropriate strategies for its realization.

The social state undergoes evolution over time due to various influences, including changes stemming from the environment, culture, religion, economic structures, scientific advancements, and technological innovations. This article focuses on alterations in the social state resulting from interventions by the public authority, which are herein referred to as public policies.

Definition 4: Public policy encompasses actions or a series of actions undertaken by the public authority, comprising both executive and legislative powers, with the overarching goal of fostering or preventing changes in the social state.

This comprehensive definition of public policy serves the purposes of this article well, as it facilitates the organization of all substantive political discourse around public policies. Conversely, another realm of political discourse revolves around the "rules of the political game," which encompasses delineating the competences of different spheres of public authority, electoral regulations, tenure and reasons for interrupting mandates, operational protocols of executive and legislative powers, among other factors.

This article operates on the premise that political debate occurs within a democratic society with established "political game rules," wherein participants firmly adhere to them. In such an environment, political discourse centers on substantive themes pertinent to the lives of society members and is propelled by discussions surrounding public policies.

It's imperative to clarify that the article's focus is not on analyzing the day-to-day political discussions on public policies. Instead, it delves into the rational justifications for endorsing or rejecting a particular public policy, as presented by individuals genuinely committed to promoting the common good.

While rational and plausible justifications for implementing a given public policy aren't the sole factors considered by decision-makers (including public officials, politicians, and voters), they are deemed significant. Enhanced discourse in this sphere correlates with improved day-to-day discussions on the implementation of public policies.

Idealistic and Pragmatic Models of Public Policies

The Idealistic Model

In this model, the initial step involves delineating a set of institutions and/or preferred modes of public authority conduct that ought to be adhered to. For instance, in discussions pertaining to public health policies, the primary objective would be to outline the ideal framework of a healthcare system or, at the very least, certain optimal characteristics that such a system should embody. While this ideal system may be aligned with a broader conception of an ideal society (such as the socialist or liberal ideal), it is not necessarily contingent upon it.

Once the ideal characteristics of societal organization have been established, the discourse shifts towards determining the most effective strategy to attain this objective. Public policies intended to bring us closer to the envisioned set of institutions and/or public authority conduct are endorsed, while those that veer us away from this ideal are rebuffed.

In this model, public policies are evaluated through the lens of specific ideal characteristics pertaining to the organization of society, which serve as a telos or ultimate goal. It's important to note that the defining feature of this evaluation model lies not in merely hypothesizing about ideal public institutions and/or public authority conduct, but rather in leveraging these ideals as a benchmark to assess public policies.

Within the idealistic model, public policy is not evaluated solely based on its immediate impact on the social state, but rather for its contribution to an idealized vision of societal organization. It's only upon the realization of this ideal organizational paradigm that the resulting social state should be appraised. However, even the partial implementation of this system is viewed positively, as it signifies progress towards the ideal healthcare system, which would ultimately yield a superior social state.

For instance, let's consider an ideal education system envisioned as comprising public schools with pedagogical autonomy and principals chosen directly by the school community (including parents, teachers, and auxiliary staff). However, student learning would be monitored through external exams in key subjects. In case of unsatisfactory performance, schools could lose their autonomy, and teachers and auxiliary staff might face relocation or dismissal. In such a scenario, implementing a system where the principal is elected by the school community could be seen as progress, despite not guaranteeing immediate improvements in student performance. Conversely, measures like vouchers or charter schools would be rejected, as the ideal system assumes education is government-provided. Even if evidence showed these measures improved student learning without increasing costs, they would still be dismissed.

Definition 5: Idealism is the conviction that specific characteristics deemed ideal in societal organization yield a social state superior to alternatives and, therefore, merit pursuit.

This ideology can manifest in either reformist or conservative political agendas. Conservatism, in this context, refers to a doctrine that upholds certain existing characteristics of societal organization as ideal and advocates for their preservation.

The Pragmatic Model

In this evaluation framework, the pursuit of an ideal state is not the primary focus. Instead, the starting point is the current state of affairs, which is targeted for improvement. The initial step involves identifying undesirable aspects of the societal state that are deemed changeable. Once these "social problems" are pinpointed, the subsequent step entails diagnosing their primary causes. Following this diagnosis, the third step involves proposing measures, or public policies, aimed at remedying or alleviating the identified social problems. Evaluation then ensues, wherein the efficacy of these public policies is assessed to determine whether they indeed achieve the intended outcomes in the societal state (impact evaluation). Additionally, moral judgments are employed to argue that the resulting societal state is superior to the one prevailing before the policy's adoption.

The pragmatic model places particular emphasis on impact evaluation, which entails analyzing the causal effect of the policy on the societal state. This evaluation can occur either before or after policy implementation, referred to as ex-ante and ex-post impact evaluations, respectively.

The term "pragmatic" also deserves a brief comment. In philosophy, pragmatism has been used to identify a current of thought which includes authors, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey. This current of thought is characterized by the idea that "efficacy in practical application - the issue of 'which works out most effectively' - somehow provides a standard for the determination of truth in the case of statements, rightness in the case of actions, and value in the case of appraisals".

Different Models of Public Policies

Idealistic Evaluation Model

The primary critique of the idealistic model for evaluating public policies is its limited compatibility with scientific methodologies and criteria, potentially leading its adherents to adopt dogmatic positions. When seeking validation or refutation, testing ideal systems proves far more challenging, if not impossible, compared to specific public policies. How does one determine whether an ideal healthcare system will yield desired outcomes once implemented? The greater the disparity between the ideal and prevailing systems, the more daunting this question becomes.

When the ideal system differs significantly from the current system, two key issues emerge. Firstly, there's the challenge of justifying the belief that the ideal system will indeed yield desired results once implemented. Secondly, there's the matter of the approach adopted by adherents of the idealistic model to realize the envisioned system.

Addressing the first issue, it's noteworthy that assertions regarding the superiority of the ideal system are typically theoretical and lack empirical support from prior experience. If grappling theoretically with minor changes is already complex, effecting major changes involving numerous simultaneous alterations could prove exceedingly challenging.

At times, proponents of the idealistic model of evaluation may idealize educational, healthcare, or transportation systems adopted elsewhere, citing the exemplary performance of students, for instance, as evidence of the efficiency of the referenced system. However, this correlation is not straightforward. Student achievement isn't solely determined by the design of the educational system; it hinges on various factors such as societal attitudes toward education, parental involvement, teacher quality, among others. Therefore, adopting another country's educational system doesn't guarantee similar results, as public policies are heavily influenced by their application context.

The problem is that the follower of the idealistic model adopts the ideal system as a criterion for validating the policies which are currently being discussed. Based on an ideal, whose results are quite uncertain, the idealistic evaluator is willing to allow a short-term deterioration in the social state to bring the form of society organization closer to that which they consider ideal. Likewise, he is willing to block policies which would lead to immediate improvements in the social state because they distance us from social institutions and ways of acting of public authorities which he considers ideal. Supporters of the idealistic model of evaluation often take dogmatic positions on public policies.

The idealistic evaluator isn't necessarily limited to idealizing the entire organizational structure of a system like education, healthcare, or justice. Their reference point could encompass specific ideal characteristics or broader principles applicable across different systems. For instance, propositions such as "production of goods and services is inherently more efficient in the private sector compared to governments" or "the state consistently outperforms the private sector in producing public and/or utility goods and services" also fall under idealistic perspectives. However, these assertions don't lend themselves to scientific verification.

Efficiency in private sector production depends on various factors such as market structure, while government efficiency can vary significantly across contexts. Government intervention in production can be viewed as a form of social technology, subject to improvement akin to natural science-based technologies. For instance, if exhaustive empirical research suggests that the private sector tends to manage the telecommunications sector more efficiently, it doesn't imply that this must always be the case. Treating such statements as immutable truths is dogmatic and doesn't contribute to enhancing public policies. Instead, it could impede progress in the societal state by discouraging exploration of potential improvements.

A Defense of the Pragmatic Model of Evaluation

The pragmatic evaluators undertake a more modest and achievable task. Similar to sciences and technologies, the pragmatic evaluation model draws upon accumulated knowledge regarding the effectiveness of public policies across various societal domains.

One potential critique of the pragmatic evaluation model is its perceived limitation to effect profound societal transformations that significantly enhance people's lives. Without a telos, this model may seem to perpetuate the existing social state without catalyzing substantial progress.

Implicit within the pragmatic evaluation model is a reformist doctrine. It entails diagnosing social problems, proposing measures to address them, and subsequently evaluating their effectiveness. This stance contrasts with both conservatism, which upholds the prevailing social organization as an ideal to maintain, and utopian visions of an ideal future system. However, this doesn't imply marginal progress only; rather, the pragmatic model embraces the same notion of progress observed in scientific and technological advancements, which have undeniably propelled significant societal advancements.

Furthermore, consensus-building is likely easier under the pragmatic model compared to the idealistic model of evaluation. In the idealistic model, consensus necessitates agreement on the ideal system's impacts on the social state and the social state itself, as well as whether a given policy aligns with the ideal system. This complexity often leads to divergence of opinions. Conversely, the pragmatic model facilitates relatively easier convergence of values for many public policies. For instance, few would oppose an educational policy that enhances student learning without significantly increasing costs. Additionally, since pragmatic evaluations focus on specific policies and employ scientific methods and criteria to assess their impacts, agreement on their positive aspects is also relatively attainable. The pragmatic evaluation model would allow a significant set of policies to be implemented with little resistance, leaving the controversies for those policies whose impacts on the social state are less clear and where differences in moral values are important.

Effectiveness of public policies and programs

Evaluating the effectiveness of public policies and programs in addressing societal problems in India is a multifaceted endeavor due to the country's diverse population, complex governance structures, and numerous socio-economic challenges. Here's an overview of how this evaluation can be approached:

Poverty Alleviation: India has several poverty alleviation programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). Evaluating their effectiveness involves assessing their impact on income levels, access to basic services, and overall living standards among the targeted population, particularly in rural areas where poverty rates are highest.

Education: Initiatives like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme aim to improve access to quality education for children across the country. Evaluation efforts would focus on indicators such as enrollment rates, retention rates, learning outcomes, and the quality of infrastructure and teaching staff in schools.

Healthcare: Public health programs like the National Health Mission (NHM) and Ayushman Bharat seek to improve healthcare access and outcomes, particularly for vulnerable populations. Evaluating their effectiveness involves assessing indicators such as immunization coverage, maternal and child health outcomes, availability of healthcare facilities, and financial protection against catastrophic health expenses.

Rural Development: Schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (PMGSY) and the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) aim to address infrastructure deficits in rural areas. Evaluation efforts would focus on the extent to which these programs have improved access to roads, drinking water, sanitation, and other basic amenities in rural communities.

Employment Generation: Programs like the Skill India Mission and the Start-Up India initiative aim to promote employment generation and entrepreneurship. Evaluating their effectiveness involves assessing indicators such as job creation, skill development outcomes, and the growth of the informal sector.

Social Protection: Welfare schemes like the Public Distribution System (PDS), the National Food Security Act (NFSA), and the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) aim to provide social protection to vulnerable populations. Evaluation efforts would focus on indicators such as food security, financial inclusion, and access to social assistance programs.

Environmental Sustainability: Initiatives like the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and the Swachh Bharat Mission aim to address environmental challenges such as climate change and pollution. Evaluating their effectiveness involves assessing indicators such as air and water quality, waste management practices, and the adoption of renewable energy technologies.

Governance and Accountability: Evaluating the overall effectiveness of public policies and programs in India also requires considering governance processes, institutional capacities, transparency, and accountability mechanisms at various levels of government.

These are just a few examples of the diverse range of public policies and programs in India aimed at addressing societal problems. Effectiveness evaluation requires rigorous research methodologies, data collection and analysis, stakeholder engagement, and consideration of contextual factors to provide meaningful insights for policy improvement and decision-making.

Conclusions

This article explores two distinct models of public policy evaluation: the idealistic and the pragmatic. In the idealistic model, social progress is attained when changes in societal organization align with idealized social institutions and governance practices. Conversely, the pragmatic model views social progress as contingent upon improvements in the prevailing social state compared to its prior state, as per established judgment criteria. Advocating for the pragmatic model, the article underscores its compatibility with scientific methodologies and criteria, as well as its capacity to facilitate the implementation of policies with minimal resistance. The adoption of different evaluation models, it argues, hampers clarity in public debates on policy implementation by obscuring points of disagreement. Furthermore, the article addresses the significance of defining an ideal state to guide public policy a topic often explored in political philosophy but neglected in academic literature on public policy. This discussion highlights the crucial yet overlooked aspect that permeates day-to-day policy discussions.

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